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ABSTRACT

While a great deal of attention is currently paid to putting individual courses or entire degree programs online, less attention is paid to what makes these courses effective. Online courses are successful and effective once instructors analyze learning communities in a traditional classroom and transfer the knowledge successfully to the online learning environment. Some of the effective learning community strategies for online courses are communication tools to actively engage students. Once students are engaged in the online course, they begin building learning communities that aid in the successful completion of online courses. Online instructors need to be focused on the collaboration and communication tools for implementing learning communities in their courses. Topics covered in this paper include the needs of students in a traditional classroom, the role of observed interaction, challenges posed when creating online learning communities, difficulties faced by students and the skills necessary to survive in an online course, and difficulties faced by instructors in an online class. Guidelines for creating online learning communities are offered, including: (1) communicate frequently with the class; (2) create a space for non-classroom related interaction; and (3) understand the limitations and strengths of the technology being used. (Contains 19 references.) (Author/MES)

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Investigating Online Learning Communities

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Abstract

While a great deal of attention is currently being paid to putting individual courses or entire degree programs online, less attention is being paid to what makes these courses effective. Online courses are successful and effective once instructors analyze learning communities in a traditional classroom and transfer the knowledge successfully to the online learning environment. Some of the effective learning community strategies for online courses are simply communication tools to actively engage students. Once students are engaged in the online course, they begin building learning communities which aid in the successful completion of online courses. Online instructors need to be focused on the collaboration and communication tools for implementing learning communities in their courses.

Introduction

An online course is only as successful as the participants perceive it to be. Studies indicate that participants want social interaction, which online learning is not providing (Dewar, 2000). Online courses can easily provide the desired interaction if instructors facilitate a learning centered approach rather than a traditional instructor-led format (Dollar, 2000).

When offering students online instruction, it is vital that instructors offer the student more than a technologically advanced version of a correspondence course (Hebel, 2000). Instructors need to give students more than discrete lessons to complete on their own, send to some faceless instructor, and receive back with comments or corrections (Hill & Rave, 2000). Studies indicate that online instructors must access their online course frequently, rotating, responding, and generating assignments that encourage interaction among students (Chapplow, 2000). Students should be offered the opportunity to interact with other students in online learning communities; places that they can test assumptions, try out new ideas, and ask difficult questions in the company of other learners who are doing the same thing (Rheingold, 1998). In order to understand online learning communities, one must start by understanding the needs of students in a traditional classroom.

Students' Needs

Students have a variety of needs when they come to a college classroom, many of which have little or nothing to do with the content of the subjects that they are studying (Chapplow, 2000). Instructors realize that a student's academic success is in some way dependent on being able to become integrated into the academic community, at least to the degree that they understand its expectations and the ways in which it operates. Instructors are aware that students have social needs when they come to college. They need to be able to find a group of like minded students with whom they can form friendships (Knox, 2001). Instructors know that

social factors can be as powerful as intellectual ones, motivating students to stay in school (Owston, 2000).

Little attention has been paid to creating and fostering the sort of social online climate that contributes to student success (Rheingold, 1998). When instructors think about planning online classes or programs, they think primarily about the intellectual content of the course or program, and they tend to forget that social factors are important (Notess, 1999).

The Role of Observed Interaction

Social factor negligence occurs partly because many of the meaningful social interactions take place outside class time. Instructors do not pay conscious attention to those interactions and think of them only in terms of the information value of the actual exchange (Mabrito, 2000). In reality, each interaction instructors have with students, and each interaction students have with other students, is multilayered because it conveys several different kinds of meanings (Maier, 2000). Individual interactions create the classroom climate; convey instructor and student expectations; and develop attitudes about the course, material being covered, instructor, and college as a whole (Chapplow, 2000).

Consider a common occurrence in the traditional classroom: students and the instructor arrive a few moments before the class is scheduled to begin. In the five minutes before class, important interactions take place (Hebel, 2000). The instructor may talk to a group of students. Students may talk among themselves. A certain percentage of those conversations will involve matters pertinent to the classroom, such as a student asking another student a question about upcoming assignments. If the second student can not answer the question, both students may then ask the instructor who might answer in the hearing range of other students. Some of these students may have had the same question, and some may have the question later when it will not be so easily answered (Owston, 2000).

During this occurrence, both students potentially learn information about their instructor as well; some by the answer the instructor gives and some through paralinguistic clues. Students observe how the instructor handles the question (Owston, 2000). Did the instructor think it was a dumb question? Should the student have already known the answer? Did the instructor treat the question with respect? Was the instructor attentive or curt with the answer? Instructors portray a great deal about the expectations they have of the class by attitudes toward questions and questioners (Mabrito, 2000).

Additionally, other students learn about the instructor and their expectations by overhearing questions and answers (Campbell, 1998). Students make determinations about the appropriateness of the question, response, questioner, and instructor. After several questions and answers, students start developing attitudes and decisions about the course, material, instructor, and classmates as shown by their actions in class. It is the accumulation of small moments like this one, along with the formal class interaction, that creates the community of the classroom (Owston, 2000). Now take away the interactions in a traditional classroom and what is left? How does an online instructor create interaction between the students and themselves, as well as between students in his or her electronic classroom? The answer is to create online learning communities.

Challenges Posed When Creating Online Learning Communities

There are numerous difficulties involved when creating online learning communities (Dollar, 2000). Many of these difficulties arise when a traditional course is moved to the online environment. Instructors no longer have the benefit of the causal interactions that allow them to create the classroom community. These interactions occur naturally as a result of the students in a class seeing each other face to face at a specified time and in a specified place. Thinking and planning for those types of experiences is not normally part of an instructor's course design

(McCampbell, 2001). Furthermore, many of the interactive strategies used by instructors and students in a classroom simply do not work with online instruction (Hebel, 2000).

Difficulties Faced by Students

Studies indicate that online instruction requires a more active role on a student's part than traditional classroom instruction does (Glasser & Poole, 1999). Since this is an uncommon method of taking courses, many students do not have the skills necessary to survive in an online course (Hill & Raven, 2000). Students need to be persistent, have the ability to analyze difficult problems, and figure out where to get help. They need to be able to phrase questions in such a way that they can get answers, and they need to be predisposed to read written material in such a way that they can get information from it which they can then use (Rheingold, 1998). These skills deserve further explanation.

Persistence

In a traditional class, students learn a great deal by hearing discussions. If a student does not understand a concept or idea, the student sometimes depends on others to ask questions. Students can go along for several class periods not actually grasping an idea, and still eventually come to understand it. If the student does not ask a question, it may take several conversational exchanges with the instructor before the confusion is clarified (Dewar, 2000). In an online environment, students need to be willing to send written messages, rather than having a conversation, in order to get their question answered (Dollar, 2000). Furthermore, they need to be alert to those moments when they sense that they are not comprehending and be willing to ask immediately for clarification (Glasser & Pool, 1999).

The Ability to Analyze a Difficulty and Phrasing Questions so as to Get Answers

In a traditional classroom, it is possible to ask very unspecific questions in order to obtain specific answers. The context of the question is clear enough because students and instructors

share the same experiences during the class period (Campbell, 1998). For example, a student can ask, "Can you go over that again?" and receive a perfectly understandable answer. It is necessary for questions to be considerably more specific if students are to receive useful answers in online courses (Dewar, 2000). Students have to create the context and identify the specific passage or moment when they become confused (Notes, 1999). They need to spell out their confusion as precisely as they can in order to receive a satisfactory explanation. (Rheingold, 1998).

The Predisposition to Read for Information Which Students Can Then Use

In a classroom, it is rare for students to have to rely solely on the written word in order to perform the work of the course (Mabrito, 2000). Instructions, even if delivered on paper, are almost always accompanied by verbal explanation (Dollar, 2000). If a student has a question about an instruction on a test, he or she is able to ask the instructor for clarification. When students are given reading assignments in a course, the instructor will often go over the main points or hold a class discussion. Except in rare circumstances, students who do very little of the reading for a course will still be able to pass (Dewar, 2000).

This is not the case in an online course. When all the information comes to students via text, they need to become proficient in reading for meaning and be able to use or apply the information they have read (Campbell, 1998). This type of reading is demanding in a different way than what students usually do in their traditional classes; it requires considerably more effort and commitment than students may be used to giving to their reading assignments (Maier, 2001).

Difficulties Faced by Instructors in an Online Class

Students are not the only ones lost in the online environment. Instructors sometimes find the transition to teaching online a hard one to make (Hebel, 2000). They no longer have the verbal and visual cues which instructors typically use to gauge students' engagement with and

understanding of the material presented (Defranco & Wall, 2001). Instructors are not often skilled in writing assignments and syllabi that do not require additional verbal elaboration. Some instructors may not provide assignment sheets at all (Mabrito, 2000). Instructors have not had the practice of answering questions at the level of specificity that online instruction demands (Campbell, 1998). Furthermore, instructors are not normally accustomed to taking initiative for contacting their students in the ways that online instruction makes necessary, and they may even have objections against making such contact (Schutte, 1999). These difficulties deserve further explanation.

Lack of Verbal and Visual Cues

When instructors first think of teaching online, the lack of verbal and visual cues are usually the most serious limitations of the online environment (Defranco & Wall, 2001). In a traditional classroom, instructors easily see what students may not tell them. They may be bored, confused, or entertained; instructors typically adjust their presentation of material in response to the cues they sense from students (Carr, 2000). Although instructors do not typically talk about student verbal and visual cues, they monitor those cues carefully.

Frequently, online instructors need to explicitly ask students whether they understand the material or the directions (Dollar, 2000). They need to make clear the fact that they are receptive to questions, and they need to answer those questions promptly, clearly, and in such a manner that people feel comfortable asking further questions (Dewar, 2000).

Lack of Experience in Writing Assignment Sheets and Syllabi

Not much in the traditional classroom prepares students for the active learning of an online course (Hill & Raven, 2000). It is rare for a syllabus or assignments to come unaccompanied with explanation. Typically the first class period in any semester is taken up at least partly by instructors going over the syllabus and assignments and answering questions

about the material (Mabrito, 2000). Even if a student's question is not answered then, instructors usually answer questions about assignments as they draw near. In a traditional classroom, there is a redundancy of information and a number of opportunities to obtain it (Chapplow, 2000). Students find it is not necessary to pay attention to information the first time it is given, and it is rarely necessary to pay close attention to information given in print (Owston, 2000).

While some instructors write detailed syllabi and assignment sheets, others do not. Most instructors are not accustomed to writing documents which require no further verbal elaboration (Mabrito, 2000). They are assumed to be clear because they were written by the person in power in the classroom, making it difficult for students to question them and instructors to admit when they are unclear (Dewar, 2000).

There are certain aspects of a syllabus or an assignment that instructors cannot change, but they need to understand that a student's request for clarification, or the instructor's need to go back and rephrase something confusing, does not mean that they failed in their communication efforts (Glaser & Pool, 1999). Instructors need to understand that misunderstanding and clarification play vital roles in communicating their expectations online particularly because instructors do not have the verbal or visual contexts which take place in the traditional classroom (Young, 2000).

Lack of Experience in Answering Questions in an Online Classroom

Students are not the only ones who rely on discussion to build meaning. Instructors sometimes answer questions by offering as little information as they think is necessary (Dollar, 2000). Other instructors might offer more elaboration than students need at a given moment, trusting that students will filter out what they do not need or ask about what they still do not understand (Dewar, 2000). Because it takes so much effort to answer questions online, it

behooves instructors to find ways of answering questions efficiently and to learn to sense what further questions might lie behind the question that students are asking (Notes, 1999).

It takes practice to learn how to answer questions thoroughly yet succinctly (Mabrito, 2000). If the question is a technical one requiring a detailed instructional answer, instructors need to remember to spell out every step in a process clearly and concisely (Carnevale, 2000). It takes some time to get a feel for the questions which may lie behind after questions about the course content are answered (Rheingold, 1998).

Lack of Experience with the Level of Contact Required Online

In a traditional classroom, if a student does not show up for class and does not do the classwork, instructors presume that there is some sort of extenuating circumstance which the student may or may not tell them (Owston, 2000). Instructors' responsibilities are clear: go to class, hold class and office hours, and if a student does not contact them, they have no further obligation to contact the student. Instructors feel that additional contact in such circumstances is intrusive or belittling to their students, who are presumably adults and capable of making their own decisions (Chapplow, 2000). Because online classes do not meet in a physical location at a specific time, it is easier for students to fall behind. They may not understand the material, because of circumstances beyond their control, or they neglected to ask for help in time (Hill & Raven, 2000). Students begin to feel guilty and stop participating in class by not turning in assignments or contributing to online discussions (Dewar, 2000). Additionally, asking for help may be seen by some students as needing remediation, and they may be unlikely to seek such help in an online environment (Dollar, 2000). This problem is compounded by the fact that a student's absence is harder to notice online, where the focus is exclusively on the people who participate regularly. Nobody sees the student who does not participate in an online course (McCampbell, 2001).

For these reasons, it is imperative that instructors maintain regular contact with students, carefully monitoring student participation and actively seeking out students who seem to be falling by the wayside. The instructor should do this until he or she is satisfied that such student understands the expectations of the class and the technology they are using to participate in it (Knox, 2001).

Guidelines for Creating Online Learning Communities

Standard guidelines for creating online courses do not exist at this time (Qwston, 2000). When reviewing literature and institutional policies regarding online courses, there is evidence that online learning communities increase the efficiency, satisfaction, and perception of online courses. The most common elements of online learning communities that instructors can use are communicating and interacting frequently with the class, creating a space for non-classroom related interaction, and understanding the laminations and strengths of the technology being used (McCampbell, 2001).

Communicate Frequently with the Class

It is important that students realize that instructors are available and intellectually engaged in the class (Dollar, 2000). Even though they might have written the entire web site or designed the entire course in special software on which their class is based, students will not readily see that instructors are present in those worlds. Therefore, it is important for students to have regular communications with the instructor and other students even though there are no face-to-face meetings (Dewar, 2000). Additionally, it is important for that communication be comprised of more than just feedback from instructors or others on assignments (Hill & Raven, 2000).

Online students, as well as students in a traditional classroom, need to feel that their instructors care about what they say and how they do in class (Dewar, 2000). One method of

letting students know this is when the online instructors e-mail all enrolled students before the semester begins, tell them about the class in a positive and friendly way, and encourage them to visit the course site. They should encourage students to e-mail questions and/or concerns about the course (Hebel, 2000). Research shows that once an online course has started, students use the course bulletin board as a means of communicating and building learning communities (Hill & Raven, 2000). In order to assist students in building this learning community, instructors should check the bulletin board every day, seven days a week, four times a day (Schutte, 1999).

Fostering student interaction is extremely important, and instructors have to begin by responding to every single posting on the bulletin board (Defranco &Wall, 2001). Instructors should never let the first posting go by without a response. They should post leading questions, then contrast responses to those questions for discussion (Chapplow, 2000). Instructors should give credit and encouragement to students for participation (Dollar, 2000). Finally, instructors must learn to back out and let the students start talking over the course material. Let students' discussions flow (Owston, 2000). In the very beginning, instructors should interact with students every time they post a comment. After a short time, instructors will find the right time to back off and let students carry on the discussion. This interaction is a very strong incentive to many students. It gives them motivation to respond (Defranco & Wall, 2000).

Another successful method of building a learning community in an online course is with instructors maintaining office hours each week, encouraging interaction and communication with students (Dewar, 2000). Instructors should incorporate the use of chat room access, allowing real-time conversation. These chat rooms allow students to receive instantaneous feedback, clarification of concepts, as well as promote discussions about topics covered in the course material (Glasser & Pool, 1999). When instructors encourage and participate in communication

by using e-mail, bulletin boards, and chat rooms, their course is more likely to become a successful learning experience for students (Chapplow, 2000).

Students should be encouraged to initiate their own discussion, allowing for development of support groups, giving the group a human dimension (Dollar, 2000). Online discussion is generally easy for most students because it eliminates a few communication barriers. Barriers such as gender, age, race, and social class are disregarded (Dewar, 2000). Another barrier removed in these discussions is the subconscious faculty bias in choosing who answers questions, allowing for diversity of opinions (McCampbell, 2001). Sensitive topics, such as certain biases based on stereotypes, are sometimes easier to discuss online than in a traditional class (Notess, 1999). Discussions pertaining to these topics are generally easier for students because they can voice their opinion while feeling secure in doing so (Chapplow, 2000). The security, although false, is in the students belief that their identity is not known, and they are not having the conversation face-to-face with the class. This can lessen the anxiety that some students feel about speaking up in the classroom setting (Mabrito, 2000).

Studies show that instructors often fail to pursue the nonparticipating students in online courses (Chapplow, 2000). If a student is enrolled in the course and is not posting to the bulletin board, the instructor should e-mail that student. Instructors should not give up easily on students that are not responding to e-mail. Some suggestions would be to call the student or mail them a letter (Notess, 1999). Instructors should keep after the stray students and, with a little bit of effort, can get those students back online and participating in the class. Instructors must let the student know that it is essential that they participate in the course (Owston, 2000).

Student online discussions can provide benefits for quieter students. The benefit of this online discussion is that the filter of the online environment allows the "wallflower" student to become involved in direct conversation without the traditional speaking barriers surfacing.

Many traditional classes can be dominated by a few students. Online classes, by their nature, force active participation (Chapplow, 2000). Every question and posting is perceived as being directed to the individual and requires response. Even introverted students must respond to all questions asked (Mabrito, 2000).

The result of online discussion is that the student becomes more self-motivated and independent in the class. The student gets more personal attention and development from the instructor. Students who are better written communicators will be able to share their ideas with the group and voice opinions, as compared to the classroom setting where they may be intimidated (Defranco & Wall, 2001).

Create a Space for Non-Classroom Related Interaction

Instructors will find it helps the class atmosphere to become congenial and collegial if students can interact with each other about more than simply the class material and assignments (Glasser & Pool, 1999). This is easily accomplished by creating private chat rooms or e-mail where students can discuss other experiences (Dewar, 2000).

Understand the Limitations and Strengths of the Technology Being Used

Instructors should use technology that they are comfortable with and use for other purposes besides teaching their class (Young, 2000). One of the reasons that the World Wide Web is such a powerful medium for instruction is that people use it for other reasons as well. Students and instructors should not be put in the position of learning a specific tool for a specific class and having both the tool and class be temporary (Schutte, 1999). Most students already use the web for entertainment; learning to do a task such as completing a form online requires nearly no learning curve, because it uses technology with which they are already familiar (Young, 2000).

Instructors should use the simplest tool they can for the purpose they want to achieve (Mabrito, 2000). Proprietary site-based software may not be the best choice for an online course or program. Students may not have adequate access to the software to become familiar enough with its use without technical support online (Schutte, 1999). This propriety software can easily add to the frustration and confusion of an online course (Young, 2000).

Conclusion

Online course and degree programs exist for the convenience of students who cannot physically come to the college campus to complete their coursework. This convenience need not be bought at the expense of other, less tangible outcomes of attending a college. The creation of online learning communities can assure that students do not miss out on the affective, social, and extracurricular cognitive opportunities generally afforded by institutions of higher education. It is incumbent upon us to provide those opportunities to online students so that a college degree does not become merely the completion of a set number of courses. College must remain the place where people encounter new ideas, challenges, and develop habits of the mind that signifies higher education.

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